Chapter-3

Life and Works of Ali Ahmad Bakathir

3.1 Bakathir's Life and Literary Development

Ali Ahmad Bakathir was born in 1910, December 21 in Surabaya, Indonesia. He was the first child of Arab parents who had come to Indonesia from Hadramawt for trade. When he was eight years old, his parents sent him back to Hadramawt as it was customary for Hadramawtian emigrants to send their children back to the homeland in order to absorb more Islamic education and Arabic language.

When Bakathir was eighteen years old he married a girl two years his junior. While he was on journey to the Hijaz, his wife died giving birth to their first child. In 1932, deeply affected by the death of his young wife, Bakathir decided to emigrate. He moved first to Aden (now capital of south Yemen) and then to Hijaz (now in Saudi Arabia). In 1934, he immigrated to Egypt. Bakathir felt that all his ties with home were cut when he received the news about the death of his daughter drowned in the house pool. In 1938, Bakathir graduated from the English department at Cairo University and became a student in the Educational Institute. In 1940, he was appointed as an English language and literature teacher. In 1945, Bakathir was married to an Egyptian widow, adopting her daughter; but he never had a child by her. In 1945 he became an Egyptian citizen.[110]

Bakathir spent fourteen years as a teacher at Al-Mansura and Cairo. In this period he established his fame as a successful novelist and playwright, and many of his plays were performed on the main stages in Egypt. In 1954, he was sent on a scholarship to France for six months; that same year he was employed in the Ministry of Culture, and he was promoted to a responsible position in the

[110] Omotoso, B. A. *Ali Ahmad Bakathir, A Contemporary Conservative Arab writers,*University of Edinburgh, 1972, p.p 28-29

Department of Artistic Supervision. He remained in that position until his late years.

Bakathir gained some significant literary honours in Cairo. He was a member of poetry and novel committee at the higher institute of Advanced Arts, literature and social sciences. He contributed to major poetic conventions both in and out of Egypt. He also represented Egypt as a chief or as a member of the Egyptian delegation to many international literary conferences. For instance, in 1956, he was invited to both Rumania and the Soviet Union by the writer's confederations of these countries. In 1958, he represented Egypt in the first conference of Asian and African writers.

In literary contests Bakathir never placed lower than second. Sometimes he won two awards in the same contest, both as a playwright and as a poet or novelist. In 1962, he received 'The Government Award for Literature and Art', and he also was given a 'Decoration for Science and Art' in appreciation of his literary efforts. In 1963, Bakathir received 'The Festival Medal of Science' and in the same year was awarded 'The Medal of Poetry'.[111]

Some of his novels were made successful movies, such as *Salamah, Wa Islamah* (O…Islam), and *Shadiyat al-Islam* (The singer of Islam). Some other works were produced as photoplays for TV: *Qitat wa Firan* (Cats and Rats) and *Al-Dunia Fawda* (The World is Chaotic). His *Faust al-Jadid* (The New Faust) is among the best of his dramatic works produced on Radio.[112]

Bakathir's artistic intentions coincided with the aims of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement (1928-1954), which called for an Islamization of society and life. Although he was never an official member of the Movement, he was considered their strong voice in drama. He regularly published a large

[111] Hamid, M. A. *Two plays by the Islamic Dramatist Ali Ahmad Bakathir Translated into English with critical commentary,* University of Illinois, 1988, p. 25
[112] Ibid. p. 25

number of his poems and short political plays continuously in their newspapers and periodicals. In this period, he gained fame as a principal dramatist of the Egyptian theatre. Indeed, Bakathir's plays dominated the Egyptian stage in the late 1940's and early 1950's; the national theatre always opened its seasons with Bakathir's plays.[113] The Muslim Brotherhood Movement was banned and thousands of its members were arrested and executed by Nasser's regime from 1954 to 1966. Since then, Bakathir's plays have not been accepted by the main theatre in Egypt.

Bakathir's plays were indirectly rejected for production in 1960's when the opportunistic left wing gained control of the theatres in Cairo and held many important positions at cultural centres. Hence, none of Bakathir's major plays were staged in the last ten years of his life (1959-1969). He received the 'State Award' in 1962 from President Nasser for his *Harut wa Marut*, one of his best works, but strangely enough this play was not staged. 'The Reading Committee of the National Theatre' never sent him a verbal or written rejection. Yet, it joined a continuing effort to eradicate Bakathir's traces, not only in the theatre but also in accounts of modern Arabic literature. News about him or his works was rarely given in the media, and he even had difficulty in publishing his work in Cairo. Until his death, Bakathir was overshadowed, ignored, and circumvented.[114]

In 1965, Bakathir wrote *Habl al-Ghasil* (The Clothes Line), a comedy in which he ridiculed the leftists. Through a play-within-a-play-plot, the dramatist created a portrait of the way leftists selected plays for personal reasons rather than artistic merit. In order to counter-attack him, the play was accepted for production and, on purpose, was badly directed and staged. This production did not have an effect and the dramatist was severely criticized by the leftist

[113] Badawi, M.M, *Shakespeare and the Arabs,* University of Cairo, 1964-65 p.13
[114] Ibid. p. 14

commentators. According to his friend, the poet Abdu Badawi, after that production Bakathir became more isolated, self-indulgent and deeply depressed. He suffered disappointment even with his closest friends, who attempted to avoid him out of fear of meeting a similar fate.[115]

Eventually Bakathir decided to leave Egypt. He set out to return to his home, south Yemen, which received its independence from Britain in November 1967. It is said that he declared, "I wish I could go home and work as a shepherd in Hadramawt, instead of dying silently in Cairo!"[116] In the month of May 1968, Bakathir's dream to visit his country came true after thirty five-years of absence. Unfortunately, Bakathir did not find at home what he expected. Consequently, he hurried back to Cairo declaring: "They have slaughtered me everywhere in the Arabian countries!"[117] He said to one of his close friends in a moment of despair that since his works were not appreciated in his world, he would give up writing dramas in Arabic and write his new works in English.

Despite all these problems, Bakathir never gave up writing dramas. In an interview he pointed out that if it was determined that many of his plays would never be acknowledged in his life-time, "there will come a time when I will be remembered and my plays will be staged according to the logic of survival of the fittest, while those who fought me will be forgotten".[118]

In this restless period, particularly in his last time, his dramatic plans and travels increased. He visited Turkey to receive inspiration for a dramatic work through inspecting the ruins of Constantinople's walls which the Muslim army surrounded. Then Bakathir went to Baghdad where he delivered a lecture about the political role of the Islamic writer 'who has to demonstrate in his committed

---

[115] Hamid, M.A. op.cit., p. 27
[116] Badawi, M.M. *Shakespeare and the Arabs*, Cairo, 1964-65, p. 74
[117] Ibid. p. 74
[118] Bakathir, A. A. *Fann Al-Masrahiyya*, Da'ar al Ma'arif, Cairo, 1964, p. 17

literature a struggle against Zionism and modern Colonization'. Then, he visited Kuwait to make an arrangement for a reprint of his works. From Kuwait, Bakathir flew to London, where he intended to settle for the remainder of his life. There, the orientalist Robert B. Serjeant, chairman of Middle Eastern studies, offered Bakathir an opportunity to teach literature at Cambridge University. At the same time he was offered another literary job with the BBC.[119]

Bakathir came back to Cairo with hopes of returning to London, but the psychological pressures in Cairo were more than his heart could bear. He was observed to be very nervous during the theatrical season and his reticent nature accelerated his end. Bakathir's sudden death on November 10, 1969, by a heart attack was a great shock to the Islamic and Arabic literary worlds.

3.2 The Literary Environment of Bakathir's Dreams

Bakathir was born as a poet and was brought up in an Arabic environment, Hadramawt, where poetry was the only known literary art. Indeed, the literary environment in Hadramawt was a continuation of the Arabs belief that eloquence in speech is a clear reflection of man's beauty. Therefore, people found in poetry the most expressive form of eloquence. This, perhaps, made historians place Arabs "among the people who most manifest enthusiasm for literary expression and are deeply moved by spoken or written words".[120]

In such an environment it was natural that Bakathir's mind would be filled with thousand of classical verses, and his nature would soon stimulate him to compose verses of his own. At first he imitated certain models, but later he let his genius follow its own inclinations and originality. The love of language

[119] Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 28
[120] Hitti, P. K. *Islam and the West: A Historical cultural survey*, Princeton, 1962, p. 90

became an aesthetic and creative delight for the poet, and in this art the young Bakathir wished to distinguish himself. It is evident in the early poems Bakathir composed in Hadramawt from the age of thirteen that he possessed a brilliant talent. The first manifestation of this, which attracted public attention, was the long elegies.[121]

In addition to these factors, Bakathir was descended from a family of famous poets and scholars. Perhaps it is worthy of note that Bakathir was always indicated in his early poems that his family belonged to the Arabian tribe 'Bani Kindah'. This tribe had contributed greatly to the Arabic intellectual life.

The sources of his education in his early boyhood years were concerned with the old and new Arabic literary legacy, Arabic language and Islamic thought and history. This strong interest in Islam and philosophy of life dominated his life and literary works as well. His overall objective was to write inspired by Islamic ideology and to represent in literature the Islamic conception of life and universe.

These social conditions, in which Bakathir was brought up, helped him to show an earlier maturity and greater acumen in his thought than many poets of his time. Bakathir's life in Hadramawt was a consistent struggle against ignorance and superstition. He persistently called for an Islamic awakening and a return to the pure original sources of Islam: the Holy Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. He became known as a social reformer as well as a poet and speaker.

In fact, Bakathir's Islamic convictions were inspired by modern Islamic thinkers, particularly by Jamal al-Dean al-Afghani (1838-1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Reda (1865-1935) who called for a restoration in the Islamic world, a genuine return to the true principals of Islam, and

[121] Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p.p 29-30

establishment of Islamic unity. The young poet struggled to reform his small society spiritually and socially, but he was strongly opposed by narrow-minded religious fundamentalist who caused him to consider leaving the country. He did leave it, but the primary reason was the death of his young wife, which shook him spiritually and exhausted him physically. In one of his early poems he expresses the tragedy of his last moments at home:

My heart is distressed, and anxiety distorts my mind.
My happiness has disappeared, and my patience has dwindled.
Where is my mind, where is my dream?
They are all lost between the sweetness of wishes, and the bitterness of longing.
My heart is stretched, my sadness is everlasting.
The blame lengthens between me and these nights.
Sometimes I feel I want to travel away, to quit submitting to what I have.
I became discontented with this home.
Whoever is disconsolate in a land, then he should prepare to fly away.
I have in the wide universe a place if my land is too small for me.[122]

3.3 Bakathir in Aden and Hijaz

The tragic death of Bakathir's wife after a long period of suffering and the weakness in his health prompted Bakathir's migration from Hadramawt in late 1932. He moved to Aden hopping that another atmosphere might remove the depression caused by the death of his beloved.

In Aden, Bakathir felt the need and importance of learning an international language in order to make himself a great poet. There he started to learn English and he wrote to his brother in Hadramawt that someday he might write poetry in English, which did happen years later. Although he admired the literary environment in Aden and enjoyed the company of its writers and poets, Bakathir did not stay long. Soon he undertook another period of travelling; he went to

[122] Bakathir, A. A. *Diwan (Izhar al-Ruba)* p. 92

North Yemen and visited his countrymen who were migrants in Somalia and Ethiopia where he was celebrated for the poems he composed there. Eventually, he felt that the only places which would spiritually cure him are the Holy cities: Makkah and Medina in Hijaz where Prophet Muhammad lived and died. Bakathir felt that only there could he purge his psychic senses of sadness.

The most significant literary event that happened to Bakathir in Hijaz was his discovery of drama. Accidentally, Bakathir was introduced to the verse plays of his favourite poet, Ahmad Shawqi, whose plays were the first he had read. He realized that poetry in dramatic form was quite different from the poetry he used to read in Hadramawt. In a collection of lectures he delivered at the institute of Advanced Arabic studies dealing with the art of drama, Bakathir describes his experiences:

> My recognition of Shawqi's verse plays made a great impression on me, it shook me to the depth. For instance, it showed me, for the first time in my life, how poetry could be an objective domain for a story from history. I was surprised to see poetry formulated, within one story, into a dialogue and argument between two or more characters who represented different viewpoints and engaged in conflict with other characters. This was different from the poetry I knew as independent Iyrics on various topics! [123]

The result of his admiration of Shawqi was an imitation of this 'new literary form', his first play: *Humam aw fi Bilad al-Ahqaf* (The Chivalrous or in the Capital of Hadramawt). The dedication of the play reveals the play's subject matter, the two major concerns of his life at that time:

> To the main source of inspiration...To my beautiful angel who preceded me to the immortal world. To my people in Hadramawt, whom I love and live for, I dedicate this drama as an eternal remembrance of the former and useful reminder to the latter.[124]

---

[123] Bakathir, A.A. *Fann al-Masrahiyya min khilal al-Tajriba*, Cairo, Dar al-Ma'rif, 1964, p. 6

[124] Bakathir, A.A. *Humam aw fi Bilad al-Ahqaf,* p. 3

The play, as an autobiographical drama, documents indirectly Bakathir's early life in Hadramawt. In it he is inspired by his great love for his deceased wife, who died in the freshness of youth. Its story depicts Bakathir's struggle against his enemies who tried to spoil his marriage. On the other hand, the play demonstrates his early awareness of social problems during the 1920's and early 1930's. Thus, it was deemed dangerous in Hadramawt because of the dramatist's call for women's schooling, use of western methods of education and new sciences, and a return to the true teachings of Islam, which deny tribal conflict, ignorance, and narrow-mindedness.[125]

Likewise, Bakathir found in this work a new artistic way to release part of his sorrows and the social concerns he carried with him from Hadramawt. Bakathir's role is echoed in Humam, the hero of the play, who is portrayed as a revolutionary poet.

The poetry of the play has an affected, dejected tone in good classical Arabic rhyme. Its style is the same as in Shawqi's plays-rhymed verse of two hemistiches. Later Bakathir confessed humbly that the play lacks coherence in its dramatic structure because he wrote it when he had no idea about drama and was confused about the distinction between poetry and dramatic verse. The significance of the play, however, is more historical than dramatic, for it documents an important stage of his early life at home.

3.4 Bakathir in Egypt: Forging New Ways

In 1934, Bakathir left Hijaz for the last station in his travels; he settled in Cairo. In his early poems, Bakathir refers to Egypt as a romantic dream. For instance, in a poem that had written in Aden in 1932, he expresses his yearning desire for three places: his town Sewoon (in Hadramawt), Java (the main island

[125] Al-Somahi, A.A. *Ali Ahmad Bakathir Hayatuhu She'ruhu al-Watni wa al-Islami*, 2007, p. 36

in Indonesia) where his mother lived; and Egypt, which he was looking forward to. In the second verse he indicates his state of mind after the death of his beloved wife:

> My peace be upon 'Sewoon' wherever I go if I depart to 'Java' or 'Egypt'. Within my chest, there is a heart that will always weep the memories of the time, which passed away.[126]

From childhood, Bakathir had the ambition to make of himself a prince of Arab poets, like those Arab poets whom he admired most, poets such as the classical Al-Mutanabbi (915-965) and the modern Ahmad Shawqi. In Cairo he met the famous Arab writers whom he had read and the poets whom he admired and corresponded with when he was in Hadramawt. His aspiration was to sharpen his poetic skills and rival great Arab poets in the centre of the Arab world.[127] In relation to that ambition, Bakathir decided that learning the English language would open a window for him and enable him to become more familiar with world literature, that he could read English literature and enjoy its great poets in their own tongue.

It was expected of Bakathir in Cairo to enter higher studies in Arabic literature and language, or to specialize in Islamic studies. But Bakathir felt differently; he felt that he was well established in these fields by his self-education in Hadramawt. In Cairo he wanted what he could not find at home and what would help him to learn to become a prince of Arab poets. He undertook a decisive step and enrolled himself as a student in the Department of English literature at the University of Cairo the same year he arrived, 1934. He chose to study English literature because he heard that English literature was rich with great poetry.[128] It was his interest not in drama but in poetry that brought him to

---

[126] Bakathir, *Diwan (Izhar al-Ruba)*, p. 150
[127] Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 35
[128] Ibid. pp 35-36

this choice. Bakathir's fascination with Shakespeare's poetry guided him to a path which would absorb him in the study of drama.

A drastic change in his literary life took place after one year in the English literature department. Bakathir found himself attracted to Shakespeare's plays in particular. He modified the direction of his literary interests through Shakespeare's poetry, not Shawqi's. Furthermore, Bakathir said that his attraction to Shakespeare was mainly for two reasons: First, he found his favourite art in Shakespeare's poetry; second, Shakespeare the playwright enabled Bakathir to discover in himself the instinct for drama.

Due to this drastic change, Bakathir passed a restless period of psychological imbalance. He started to modify his approach to literature itself. During his second year in the English Department, he reverted for a while to versification in traditional Arabic modes, which he published in Egyptian magazines. Eventually, however, he made an experiment that not only was new to Bakathir but also influenced the future of Arabic poetry. This experiment gave birth to what Bakathir called *al-nazam al-mursal al-muntslaq* (running blank verse).[129]

Bakathir's experiments in verse drama came out of his dissatisfaction with the way Arabic verse drama was written by Ahmad Shawqi and Aziz Abaza in whose works we see a composition of connected poems rather than drama. For instance, the poet sometimes makes one line shared by two characters, with each character speaking one hemistich. If the lines are read with disregard to the characters, the result would be a meaningful complete poem. Dissatisfied with these conventions of verse drama in his time, Bakathir came to the realization that rhyme and its music are not an essential part of poetry and that the monorhyme limits the sense and leads the poet away from his original conceptions: it obliges him to adjust his emotions and thoughts to the rhyme, an

[129] Bakathir, A.A. *Fann al-Masrahiyya,* p. 8

act which shocks the poet from his trance-like state of creative sensitivity; that its jingling effect disturbs the melody of the meter and that in a good poem images and ideas are more important elements.[130]

It is evident that Bakathir, at this early point, sensed that the formal symmetrical structure of Arabic poetry was a major problem in Arabic verse drama. The hemistiches and same rhyme endings all through a passage distract from the dramatic action. This made symmetrical poetic structures look inappropriate for drama. Bakathir perhaps observed this superficial feature in the poetic medium of Shawqi and Abaza which is an advanced continuation of the tradition of early Arab verse-dramatists such as Al-Naqqash, Al-Qabbani and Uthman Jalal. This feature appeared in Bakathir's first play, which he wrote in Hijaz in imitation of Shawqi's plays. No doubt Shawqi and Abazah sensed the problem of rhyme and tried to solve it by splitting lines between characters which Bakathir also did in his first play. Bakathir relates his daring experiment to two occasions: The first was indirect, when he started to translate Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* into Arabic rhymed verse; he published acts of this translation in *Al-Risalah*, the leading literary periodical of the time. Suddenly, then, Bakathir stopped translating when he realized that conventional verse is not the correct medium to translate Shakespeare's dramatic verse into Arabic. The second occasion was the direct reason for his experiment. It happened in a classroom, when his British professor said arrogantly that the English language is a vanguard language because it has running blank verse-in contrast with other languages and in particular French. The teacher added that no doubt the Arabic language would be unable to create this kind of poetry. At that juncture, the student Bakathir interrupted and said, "So far, you are right, that such a kind of blank verse does not exist in our language. Each language has its own traditions.

[130]Moreh, Semuel, *Modren Arabic Poetry 1800-1970*, Netherland Vol-5, 1976, p. 258

But I strongly believe that the Arabic language is flexible and capable of expanding for any sort of literary forms"[131]. The teacher ignored him and said: "that is absurd." Young Bakathir wanted to challenge his arrogant teacher by disproving what he said.[132]

On the same day the idea occurred to Bakathir to translate *Romeo and Juliet*, which was a class textbook of the academic year 1936. Subconsciously, he found himself going beyond the traditional limitations of Arabic poetic meters. He kept doing it until he finished the translation. In his introduction to the play Bakathir explained his method as follows:

> My translation of Romeo and Juliet was my first experiment in blank verse of the kind which you find in this book. The spirit and manner of expression of Shakespeare himself suggested it to me. This convinced me that translating him in another kind of verse would not convey the full meaning of his writings… The versification which you find in this book is a mixture of blank overflow versification and free verse. It is free from rhyme, and it is overflowing because its thought continues in the following lines. The line here is not a unit, the unit is only the complete proposition which can extend over two or three lines or even more and the reader can only stop at the end of the thought. This kind of verse is said to be free also because it does not adhere to a given number of feet in each line.[133]

Being well-educated and knowledgeable in English language, poetry and drama, Bakathir understood that the laws of classical Arabic prosody limit the potential of dramatic verse. Accordingly, he attempted to make use of Western verse forms. Bakathir broke the tradition of Arabic poetry which takes the verse line to be a complete unit; instead he made the stanza or paragraphs the unit of thought. He also disposed of the monorhyme and most classical Arabic metrics. He varied the number of feet in each line according to the demands of the situation.

---

[131] Bakathir, A.A. *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, p. 9
[132] Ibid. p. 9
[133] Moreh, S. op. cit., p. 201

The translation was a mixture of 'running blank verse' and 'free verse'. Later, Bakathir realized that he had opened a new phase, not only in the history of Arabic poetry, but also in the method of translating Shakespeare into Arabic.

3.5 Pioneer of Verse Drama

In 1938, a year before his graduation encouraged by the success of his translation *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), Bakathir thought of a more advanced step: he would write a play of his own in free verse. Thus Bakathir's new play *Ikhnatun wa Nefertiti* (1940) became the first Arabic free verse drama. It tells about Ikhnatun (1379-1362 B.C), the young Egyptian pharaoh who revolted against the religion of Amun and called for monotheism based on love and peace, which reflects the message of Islam. Shakespeare's technique was imitated in a subtle way in this play, which shows the unique progress Bakathir achieved in his first play by comparison with other Arabic verse dramas.

One of the leading Egyptian critics, Ibrahim Abdul Qadir al-Mazini wrote a preface to *Ikhnatun wa Nefertiti*. He admired the play's aptness in dramatic dialogue. Al-Mazini pointed out that most Arabic meters suffer from the domination of melody which makes them unsuitable for dramatic dialogue. Bakathir solved this major problem when he came to the understanding that lines of two hemistiches, with a prescribed number of feet and mixed meters, are not the appropriate techniques for verse drama. There was a need for a meter that quiets the strength of melody in a way that makes the audience identify the dramatic function. Therefore, Bakathir employed only one meter-mutaqarib-with an irregular number of feet in the lines. Thus, he was the first Arab dramatist who employed one meter through an entire drama with an irregular length of lines.[134]

[134] Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 40

This achievement was not received warmly by critics. Al-Mazini-as contemporary critics admit today-was the only leading critic who recognized the value of Bakathir's innovation and welcomed it. Indeed, Al-Mazini was more advanced in his thought than his literary environment at the time. In his introduction to the play, Bakathir tried to make the distinctions absolutely clear. He says:

> When I translated Shakespeare's *Roemo and Juliet* into Arabic three years ago (1936), I Called the form al-nazm al-mursal al-muntaliq which is an equivalent for the English term "running blank verse". Indeed, after a long period of consideration I came to the conclusion that this is the best method for translating Shakespeare into Arabic. I found that the only meters which were appropriate to use for running blank verse are those which repeat one kind of foot, such as kamil, rajaz, mutaqarib, and mutadarik, etc. others which use different type of feet such as Khafif and tawil etc, are unsuitable to this method, so I used all suitable meters in my translation of Romeo and Juliet. Later I noticed that the most suitable meter for this new kind of poetry is al-mutadarik which I used throughout this play.[135]

Bakathir's method was different from those applied by poets like Al-Zahawi and Abu-Haddad and others, who called their versification 'running blank verse'. Their method of versification does not vary from traditional Arabic poetry except that it is unrhymed.[136]

Moreh suggests that Bakathir benefited greatly from Sheakespeare's blank verse and techniques such as overflow of sense, and the use of paragraph, not the line, as the unit of sense. Moreover, he used *mutadarik* meter exclusively throughout the drama, and allowed himself to use a more frequently varied number of feet in the lines, according to the demand of sense. He thus avoided interpolation, which is the conversational line of verse with its prescribed

[135] Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, p.9
[136] Ibid, p. 9

number of feet, and was able to use rhythm in dialogues which would be closer to ordinary speech and more suitable to theatrical performances.[137]

Ikhnatun wa Nefertiti became an influential work in modern Arabic literature. Its significance soon became apparent in both Arabic poetry and poetic drama as an avant-garde work. Consequently Bakathir's experimentation in blank and free verse was a revolutionary step. The influence of Bakathir's innovation of free verse created a drastic change in Arabic poetry, but its effect was not seen immediately. It was not until the late 1950's and early 1960's that the echo of Bakathir's experimentation in dramatic free verse became effective, when a wave of Arab poet-playwrights like Abd al-Rahaman al-Sharqawi, Salah Abd al-Sabur started to write their dramatic works in free verse.

3.6 Prose as a Medium for Drama

It was expected then that Bakathir would keep writing his poetic plays in free verse but once again he changed direction. Bakathir asserted that the best way to find great Arabic poetic drama is to look for 'running blank verse', in which the lyrical element will not be emphasized. Traditional Arabic poetry might be used only in lyric plays. He applied this method when he wrote *Qasr al-Hawdaj* (Camel-Litter Opera) and *Al-Shaima Operetta*, in melodic classical poetry.[138]

Bakathir explains that he learned from the history of drama that verse is out of context in modern theatre, especially after the prevalence of realistic trends in play direction and in modern play writing. He cites T. S. Eliot and Maxwell Anderson as among the few who tried to revive verse in drama. The most outstanding dramatic poet is W. B. Yeats who believed that a return to verse drama would be the only way to save theatre from the domination of excessive

[137] Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 42
[138] Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, p. 14

realism. Bakathir suggests that Yeats succeeds through his poetical imagery, both visual and auditory, in creating high emotional intensity. But this success- according to Bakathir pertains to the environment of the Irish Renaissance. He observed that the theatrical movement in Ireland regressed from verse drama to realistic drama.[139] Nevertheless, this reveals that a comparison between the method of Yeats and Synge was in Bakathir's mind. "Yeats's verse drama presents a remote past through which he seeks to suggest ideas for the present… his plays often achieve mythical grandeur but remain obscure as to their contemporary relevance".[140] Bakathir seems to admire Synge, who was originally a poet but chose to write in lilting, poetic prose to present realistic situations with universal significance.

In this transitional period Bakathir came to the conclusion that poetry should be used only in lyrical drama such as opera and operetta. Bakathir confirmed that he meant rhymed poetry, because the unrhymed is suitable for drama whenever the situation requires. He also suggested that what drama needs is not versification but poetical language which does not have to be limited by meters. This new approach helped Bakathir relate to Shakespeare's genius, not to the quality or to the style of his as he once believed. Eventually he concludes that even if Shakespeare had not confined himself to versification, his poetical language would have sufficed. Furthermore, Bakathir argues that Shakespeare's preference of verse to prose was only following the tradition of that age, which preferred verse in drama in an imitation of classical drama.[141]

Likewise, Bakathir believes that the subject matter of the play has something to do with the language of the drama. He gives as an example that verse is no need for poetical language in social and political plays. Poetical language is the

---

[139] Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiya*. p. 13
[140] Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 43
[141] Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, p. 20

language of philosophical and metaphysical issues which transcend beyond the material world into the unknown world of the subconscious.

It has been a custom in the Arabic theatre that social and political plays are written in colloquial Arabic while historical and translated plays are rendered in literary language. The reason which is usually offered by the advocates of colloquialism is 'realism', with the understanding that characters should speak on stage the same language that is spoken in daily life.

Bakathir labelled such an approach as a method of play writing. His objection to the vernacular in dramatic dialogue arose from the belief that those who write their plays in local dialects merely respond to commercial considerations rather than artistic qualities. Bakathir dismissed the claim that a character should speak the same language as his/her environment. He says,

> Why has it never been said that the events of Othello should happen and take the same time which they need in real life?... Why has it never been asked that Othello should speak Italian instead of English? Or, why do not we ask why Othello speaks Arabic on the Arabic stage in spite of not knowing our language?[142]

To support his argument, Bakathir quotes English books like Hermon Ould's *The Art of Theatre* and Desmond McCarthy's *Theatre.*

Like the realists, Bakathir believed that theatre is the most selective art, which reduces the dialogue to its absolute essentials. In addition, Bakathir rejects the extreme in the dramatic dialogue of naturalists who attempt to make their characters speak exactly as they do in daily life, as in John Galsworthy's plays, and the other extreme of the realists who have characters speak as their mouthpieces, like Bernard Shaw. Thus, he concludes that local dialects have nothing to do with realism, and he considered Chekhov's and Ibsen's dialogues the best of modern realism in drama.

---

[142] As quoted in Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 45

3.7 Bakathir's Works and Philosophy

Bakathir lived his life as a true Muslim and his philosophy of life was purely Islamic. His life's purpose was to serve Islamic literature through the establishment of an Islamic drama which would lead to an Islamic theatre. To him Islamic drama did not mean a drama based on Islamic history and great Muslim heroes. Islamic history and heritage is just one of the sources for an Islamic drama. Since Islam is not only a religion but also a philosophy of life and a universal ideology, Bakathir believed the Islamic dramatist should not confine himself to the Muslim culture. Rather, an authentic dramatist can locate his drama anywhere in the universe, as long he is committed to his philosophy.

The function of the Muslim dramatist and the literary writer in general, according to Bakathir, is to be committed against the dangers that threaten his society and nation. Faithful to this commitment, Bakathir devoted most of his plays to the Arab-Muslim quest for freedom, independence and unity; he drew most of his subject matter from a history in which he recognized sorry and deteriorating political conditions. However, despite his strong political concerns, Bakathir states that the didactic artist has to make the preacher in himself serve the dramatist not to be his master.[143] He uses the example of Ibsen and Shaw as preachers, but in his opinion, that did not negate their art.[144]

Bakathir's dramatic sources are various; he wrote plays based on Islamic history, Quranic stories, pre-Islamic history of ancient Egypt, Arabic folklore, political history of the modern world etc.

A. Islamic History:

[143] Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, p. 19
[144] Ibid. p. 26

Shadiyat al-Islam (The Singer of Islam) is an operetta about the Prophet Muhammad, through the struggle of the Apostle's foster sister, who supported her brother with her songs.

Malhama Umar (The Epic of Umar) is Bakathir's monumental dramatic work, which is considered the second largest literary work in length in world literature after Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts*, as Bakathir himself claimed. The Epic consists of nineteen volumes; each of the dramas could be performed as an independent play but the entire work would require fifteen consecutive performances. Bakathir named his drama an epic to reveal the lofty grandeur which the Muslim nation reached under the leadership of Umar bin al-Khattab (634-644) when the spread of Islam reached its zenith. The political connotation of the works is call for united Islamic power to replace the Western superpowers, based upon the model of Umar's Islamic Empire.

B. Quranic Stories:

Harut wa Marut is a famous drama written by Bakathir based on the story from the Holy Quran, and it will be discussed elaborately in the next chapter.

C. Pre-Islamic History of Ancient Egypt:

Uziris depicts the confrontation between the powers of evil and the call for love represented in the peaceful *Uziris* and his evil brother Sit. *Uziris* loses his life because he does not believe in power as an equal means against his enemy; but *Uziris*'s son invokes peace and avoids his father's mistake.

Al-Fir'awn al-Maw'ud (the Foretold Pharaoh) depicts the circumstances in oppression that bring a strong leader who spreads justice.

Al-Fallah al-Fasih (The Eloquent Farmer) is a comedy about a pharaoh king, who believes that oppression and torture make poets produce great literature.

D. Arabic Folklore:

Mismar Juha (Juha's Nail) a symbolic comedy, condemns the British colony in Egypt. The play is based on a well-known joke of Juha, a popular character with a ludicrous sense of humour in Arabic folkore. In addition to Juha's 'sagacity', Bakathir adds to him a political dimension as a maker of a revolution. The play was considered one of Bakathir's most successful dramas on stage.

Sirr Shahrazad (The Secret of Shahrazad) is another play which relates the story of Shahriar and Shahrazad. The legendary Shahrazad's main function is that of a story teller. In other words, the tale of Shahriar and Shahrazad is a device which gives *The Thousand and one Nights* its context and atmospheric unity.[145]

E. Political History of the Modern World:

Awdat al-Firdaws (The Return of Paradise) is about the Indonesian Muslims struggle for liberation of their country. *Al-Za'im al-Awhad* (the Despotic Leader), which condemns tyranny and communism and makes fun of Abdul Kareem Gasm's late 1950's system in Iraq.

F. Western Dramatic Works:

Ma'sat Udib (the Tragedy of Oedipus) and *Faust al-Jadid* (The New Faust) are based on ancient western literary works.

G. Social Drama:

Julfadan Hanim deals with the problem of the man of letters in a materialistic world.

Al-Silsilah wa'l-Ghufran (The Chain and Repentance) is about the social consequences of adultery on the solidarity of the family.

In all these categories of plays, Bakathir was to change method as he drew from various sources, but his Islamic philosophy and political thought never altered. Thus, it is difficult to study these works according to their subject matter

[145] Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 110

because all Bakathir's plays are political, to some degree, reflecting the Islamic point of view. Generally, Bakathir's plays fall into two large groups; plays inspired by historical events, which are all political and plays inspired by ideas. The works in the first group of plays might be based on ancient or modern history, but the dramatist's motive arose from a political event that concerned him. The second group of plays stemmed from an idea conceived in the dramatist's mind for which he later found suitable dramatic form.

3.7.1 Plays Inspired by Events

Bakathir is truly the first Arab playwright who approached drama as a political tool for change. His political plays call for national unity, which is a step to Islamic unity and an urge for solidarity and struggle against the colonizing powers. Bakathir admitted that he had always been more attentive to the foreign threat to Arab society in the present and future, than to social problems. He says:

> My political concerns have always overshadowed the social problems because of my credo that the latter could be fixed in the long run after we get rid of the foreign domination. This is the feeling which always dominates my motifs for writing. But sometimes when I reconsider rationally, I find myself convinced that the social reformation has to be the base for the political change. We cannot establish political settlements without a healthy society. This logic disappears, however, when I come to write because of my political sensitivity which always takes the lead in dramatic inspiration. It is not strange though, because art is more relevant to emotion than reason.[146]

Bakathir's main political obsession was the subordination of the Arab states by the political domination of the Western powers, especially the Russians and

[146] Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 51

Americans, and its consequences, which partially caused the implantation of the state of Israel in Palestine.

In many of his historical plays Bakathir recalls similar situations to indicate that the crusades have not yet ended. Bakathir believes that the confrontation with the West will not come to an end until Palestine is returned to its original people, because Israel is a Western bastion in the Islamic world. He concludes in his plays that the disunity in the Arabic East deters any true action toward the liberation of the lost land, Palestine. Indeed, Bakathir is the most political Arabic dramatist, as a Western scholar finds his works where he penetrates the soul of a people, to feel what is at the bottom of any movement for independence or a nationalist exasperation, or even to foresee the reactions of the masses to Western policies regarding one or the other of the Near East countries.

Bakathir's principal political interest lay in the Arab-Israeli conflict over Palestine, which led him to writing political comedies. The dramatist found himself attracted to write comedies when the problem in the Arab East reached its peak in the beginning clashes in Palestine between the original Arab citizens and foreigners, both Zionistic Jews and the British, which resulted in the defeat of Arab armies in 1948. The dramatist comments on the connections between his comic treatments and the tragic political problems saying:

> Since I began to write for theatre I had believed that I would never write comedies, thinking that my personal nature lacks the ability of making laughter and fun. Not until the political crisis began to rise in our world did I find that it is not strange when mockery and sarcasm emanate from indignation and anger. This, at least, has been proven through my personal experience.[147]

In this period, the most difficult time the Arabs had ever faced in the modern age, Bakathir had a strong tendency to mock colonialism and the international

[147] Bakathir, A.A. *Fann al-Masrahiyya* p. 26

political figures who supported Israeli existence in Palestine. Therefore, political issues became the concern which dominated Bakathir's works throughout his later career. He tended to make fun in his comedies of characters like Prime Minister Churchill of Britain during 1940-45/51-55, and Jan Smuts of South Africa during 1939-48.

I would Remain in the White House is the first political comedy Bakathir wrote. It makes fun of Truman, the American President who supported and participated in the establishment of the Zionist state in Palestine in 1948. The success of this play encouraged Bakathir to write more political comedies. For instance, in one of his lectures at the Institute of the Advanced Arabic Studies, Bakathir points out his new experience in comedy:

> When the discussion of the Palestinian problem had reached a very hot level at the United Nations, Mr. Trygve Lie, the Secretary General, was allying with, and entirely supporting the Israeli side. I got nervous whenever I read about him or saw his ugly picture. He acted not as an arbitrator but more as a Zionist, he was more than the Zionists themselves. My hatred of him increased day by day until he became my nightmare which spoiled my serenity. I found no way to retaliate on this prejudicial man but through my only weapon, my pen. I thought of tearing him in a comedy. But how? It did not take me long to find a way. An idea enkindled in my mind, and was enlarged by my imagination, into a form that never occurred to me before. As soon as I began to write the images came clearly and easily in front of my eyes, like watching a movie. This play is named Money Retaliates.[148]

Since none of Bakathir's political plays has been translated into English, a summary of his representative plays will help the Western reader understand this phase of the dramatist.

Shayluk al-Jadid

[148] Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyyah*, p. 27

Bakathir's fame in political drama rests on his *Shyluk al-Jadid* (The New Shylock) a pioneer masterpiece on the subject of the Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine. Bakathir wrote this play in early 1944, three years before the establishment of the state of Israel. Through his shrewd political sense, Bakathir anticipated in *New Shylock* the defeat of the Arab army and the establishment of the state of Israel. On the other hand, the events of the play suggest a victory for the Palestinian side through an economic embargo by the Arab countries. The first part of Bakathir's expectation came true, and the state of Israel was established. Later Bakathir was asked about the other part of his prophecy, which was the collapse of the state of Israel in seven years through an Arab economic embargo; Bakathir's answer was daring; he states that this would have happened if the Arab rulers were sincere enough, and were not dictated to by the Zionist trends in Western countries.[149]

In his *Fan al-Masrahiyya* Bakathir explains the political circumstances that urged him to write his play:

> In1944, I was preoccupied with following the events in Palestine through reading the newspapers and books that dealt with the problem. Once it happened that I read that the Zionistic leader Jabotinsky spoke in the British House of Commons, pounding his hand on the podium, as he said: "Give us the pound of flesh… we will never abandon the Pound of flesh." He was referring to the Declaration in 1917 in which Balfour promised the Jews a national home in Palestine… Here I found what I was looking for. This Statement could be used in no way but as a testimony against Zionism. I decided use this statement as a theme of my play. So, I recalled Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and when I read it I found my concept conformed to the basic structure of *The Merchant of Venice*. Then it did not take me long to write it.[150]

[149] Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, p.44
[150] Ibid. p. 43

Bakathir's play, in its general structure, is a reworking of the action in *The Merchant of Venice*. To Bakathir, Antonio's body is the Arabic world, the pound of flesh is Palestine, and the agreement between Shylock and Antonio is Balfour's Declaration. As it was impossible to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's body because the consequence is against human rights, likewise the Balfour Declaration is against human rights because its consequences decree the elimination of the Palestinian people. Bakathir writes, "The one, who did not have the right to give (Balfour), declared a promise to the one who did not deserve (Zionists)".[151]

Bakathir's play takes place in Palestine and like Shakespeare's is divided into two parts: The 'Problem' and 'Solution'. In the first part Shylock is the chief of a Jewish Zionistic terrorism group which uses all kinds of means to appropriate more land of Palestine before the departure of the British. The characters include: Rachel, a deceitful and coquettish Jewish girl; Chohen, one of the most famous lawyers; Jack, chief of the Jewish purchasing Committee which is responsible for buying the Arab land, and Benjamin, the designer of the Zionistic propaganda. The action of this part takes place among the frantic Israeli terrorists, who intimidate the Palestinians to sell their homes and land. Rachel plays an essential role in the Israeli transactions; she works as their emissary, who lures the Palestinian Abdullah al-Fayed to sell his immense lands.

The second part occurs 'sometime in the future'. The action takes place in a Palestinian Court of Justice. Invited by the British authorities, twelve members from the International Commission of Arbitration are discussing the way to a solution of the Palestinian problem. In an atmosphere similar to the court scene in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, a heated debate takes place between the mandatory power representative of the international commission and the Arab

[151] Bakathir, *Fann al-Masrahiyya*, p. 44

delegates when the latter notices the former supports the Zionistic side represented in Shylock who keeps repeating: "The British have promised us a pound of flesh… Now we want it."[152]

The end of this play presents similar incidents and the sanctions Shakespeare inflicted on Shylock. Indeed, Bakathir comes closer to Shakespeare in the final act when Nadia, a law student and future wife of Abdullah Faiyad, plays Portia's role, as in *The Merchant of Venice*. The court sentences sanctions against Israel. Shylock, unable to bear the decision, commits suicide.

3.7.2 Plays Inspired by Ideas:

Bakathir suggests that it is not against Islamic originality to benefit from the Western heritage and modern experience "since they have preceded us in the art of drama"[153]. Once Muslim consciously maintains their originality, he goes on to say, "Western dramatic attributes will never change essence. Instead, our Islamic soul would be reflected influentially through that new form".[154]

Bakathir considered the European story-form among the best dramatic tools that an Islamic dramatist could use to convey his message to the West. An Islamic treatment of the story of Oedipus or Faust in drama, Bakathir suggested, "would make it easier for the Western audience to comprehend our thought because such stories are well known to them"[155]. So when the drama has influence, it would be due implicitly to the Islamic idea of the play in its new form.

In order to create an Islamic impression on his audience, Bakathir does not use direct reference to Islam in the plays of ideas that take place in pre-Islamic periods or outside the Islamic world. Instead, he subtly transforms themes from

[152] The play
[153] As quoted in Hamid, M. A. p.58
[154] Bakathir 'Radio Speech' Kuwait April 1969. Available in Hamid, M.A.op. cit., p. 58
[155] Hamid, M.A. Ibid, p. 59

the Holy Quran into dramatic actions, producing Islamic connotations. Bakathir's *Ikhnatun*, *Oedipus* and *Faust* with all their sins and mistakes are not identified as Muslims, but they act as Muslims in their attitudes and indirectly express Islamic philosophy. Bakathir was aware that any direct reference to Islam in such dramas would break the illusion of place and time. A thematic view of these three plays will serve as the best introduction to these representative Bakathir dramas of ideas.

Ikhnatun wa Nefertiti

The play reflects the Islamic idea that a call for love and peace must be protected by a strong sword. Bakathir offers a new interpretation of the failure of Ikhnatun, whom the dramatist considers a prophet inspired by God to call for monotheism. In order to define his didactic goal, Bakathir uses verses from the Holy Quran as keys in his plays. His interpretation of the character and message of Ikhnatun is inspired by the following verse in which God talks to Prophet Muhammad in the Holy Quran:

> We did aforetime send Apostles before thee: of them there are some whose story we have related to thee and some whose story we have not related to thee.[156]

Since Ikhnatun is not mentioned by name in the Holy Quran, Bakathir considers him one of those apostles whom God sent to call for Islam (in its broad meaning, Islam is the religion of all Apostles God sent from Adam to Muhammad). The following dialogue between Ikhnatun and Hurmuhib, the leader of his army, about the 'message' and 'means' represents the basic argument of the play:

> IKHNATUN: What does your sword's wisdom invite me to do?
>
> HURMUHIB: Command me to take my army to Syria to fight the dissidents and support your governors. Let me stabilize there the situation, and destroy the power of your enemies.

[156] Holy Quran, (XL: 78)

Let me lead a war against their attacks that complete them remain in their homes forever. Then you can send your messengers in my traces to convey your lofty teachings and make them embrace your religion in groups.

IKHNATUN: Hurmuhib, there is compulsion in the religion of God.

HURMUHIB: By argument and evidence?

IKHNATUN: Yes, by argument and evidence.

HURMUHIB: Even that, my king, you can't do. We have first to establish security, but that can't be done unless you strike the hands of dissidents.

IKHNATUN: How can I call for the faith of love and peace and fight them with the sword?

HURMUHIB: Did God forbid you to fight, my king?

IKHNATUN: He asked me to call for peace and love.

HURMUHIB: But did you receive a precise order that commands you not to fight?

IKHNATUN: No, but a call for love and peace requires abandoning war.

HURMUHIB: It appears to me that your God did not mean that, my king.

IKHNATUN: O….. Man, I know better than you what my God means!

HURMUHIB: I don't deny that my king knows his God's intentions better, but I believe the creator of Universe is the wisest. God would not order what can't be done.

IKHNATUN: Is it an objection to God's wisdom, Hur?

HURMUHIB: No objection to God's wisdom, my king, but I doubt that we understand His wisdom.

IKHNATUN: You are a man of immense politeness and sensitive feeling. Are you saying that I understand not God's wisdom?

HURMUHIB: My apologies, my king…….!

IKHNATUN: Be always clear with me. Directness in speech may annoy Pharaoh but pleases the apostle.

HURMUHIB: But you are the Pharaoh of Egypt and its great king before you are the messenger of Aton.

IKHNATUN: Ah!! I wish to become only a messenger of God and be freed of my Pharaohism!

HURMUHIB: My king, God perhaps has chosen the Pharaoh to be his messenger, for his authority would enable him to establish God's message on earth.

> IKHNATUN: You still sing your melody, Hurmuhib! God has made me his messenger for people to see a Pharaoh of power abandoning war, aggression, and oppression and calling for peace, love and kindness.[157]

The connotation in the play suggests that Ikhnatun, like Jesus, did not apply the right means against those who threaten the call for love and peace. Thus, the failure in the message of God was caused by the wrong interpretation and application of the Apostle. At the moment he dies by the sword of one of his enemies, Ikhnatun seems to realize the wisdom of God which reveals that the use of power is lawful, if it is not necessary, in order to promote peace and love:

> IKHNATUN: ……. Now I understand why my brother the 'carrier of the sun' holds a sword in his left hand! He strikes a spoiled organ to save the entire body. A wisdom I missed resulted in a collapse of all my work.
> (to Hurmuhib) O my friend, you have reminded me, I wish I had listened to you! But it is too late…. too late.[158]

Mas'at Udib (The Tragedy of Oedipus)

Bakathir's Islamic perspective led him to make a major dramatic change in the myth of Oedipus. He stripes his play of mythical elements; that is, he does not change the outer appearance of the myth but he substitutes other character motives: the prophecy, sphinx and temple are there but unreal in Bakathir's *Oedipus*; they are only man-made. The major changes which Bakathir introduces into the Greek plot can be summed up in the following statement.

When Jocasta, the wife of Laius, becomes pregnant, Polybe is envious and obsessed by the idea that Laius family may take over his kingdom after his death, because he is sterile. As a result, the priest Lokasis promises polybe to find a solution if the king pays a large sum of money to the temple. In order to force Laius to abandon his child, the priest takes the bribe and spreads a false

[157] Bakathir, *Ikhnatun wa Nefertiti*, pp 122-125
[158] Ibid. pp 162-163

prophecy: "Laius will have a son who kills his father and marries his mother"[159]. Increasing the likelihood that the prophecy will come true, the priest arranges with Laius servant to take Oedipus to king Polybe instead of killing him.

Oedipus grows up in the palace of Polybe believing that Polybe is real father. Once the high priest sends a man to drink with Oedipus who during a quarrel, tells him that he is not the real son of Polybe. Indirectly, the man encourages Oedipus to go to the temple to verify what he has said. In the temple Lokasis, who knows the stubborn nature of Odeipus, confirms that Polybe is not his father and warns him of going to Thebes. But Oedipus views the prophecy as a superstition, does not listen, and decides to challenge the prophecy, returning to his father. While Oedipus is on his way to Thebes, the chief priest sends someone to inform Laius that his son has not really died, and the son is coming now to kill him. Laius prepares to confront his son, and when the two men meet, Oedipus tries to kiss his father's head and to explain. But Laius and his men lead a hostile attack against Oedipus, resulting in Laius death. Oedipus feels double sorrow: that he killed his father unintentionally, in self defence, and additionally, that he fulfilled part of the temple's forecast. This makes him decide to continue to Thebes but not to marry his mother, to prove the falseness of the prophecy.

The chief priest Lokasis invents and spreads the forecast that there is a sphinx outside the walls of Thebes, who kills the people. Creon announces that the kingdom of Thebes and the widow, Queen Jocasta, will be offered to the one who kills the sphinx. Oedipus defeats the sphinx, which is a mere masked doll, played by a little priest who is ordered to do so by the priest Lokasis. Oedipus is quite distracted by his victory and forgets about the identity of his real mother. He doubts that this young pretty lady can be his mother, especially when his adopted mother appears to him in a vision and asks, "How can you get married

[159] Bakathir, A.A. *The Tragedy of Oedipus*

far from me?"[160] This instills in him the strong feeling that Laius is not his father and Jocasta is not his mother; all must be a Lie of Lokasis.

The main characters are the same as Sophocles, except for Lokasis, created, who is by Bakathir to lead a conspiracy and fabricate the Oracle against Oedipus. Oedipus children do not play essential roles; Antigone is portrayed as faithful to God. Jocasta is a traditional wife, her naivety being exploited by clergymen. Creon is not hypocritical, but he, like his sister, is betrayed by the hypocrisy of the temple. He believes the prophecy spread by Lokasis, and then he has a clash with Tiresias, when the old priest comes to tell the truth about the false prophecy.

Bakathir's *Oedipus* decides to confiscate the fortunes and the land of the temple to save his people. At the beginning Oedipus is portrayed as a secular socialist. Later, Tiresias helps him to distinguish the difference between the temple and God. At this new stage, Oedipus realizes that the temple never represents the word of God and the prophecy is made by the false priest, Lokasis. Therefore, Oedipus problem is not with God but with the temple.

Here, Tiresias is no longer a Greek pagan; he represents Islamic thought, as his speech is full with phrases from the Holy Quran (he speaks like Hermus in *Harut wa Marut*). Through the discussions between Tiresias and Oedipus (which seem like a debate between a secular socialist and an Islamic scholar), Bakathir suggests the Islamic concepts of 'free-will' and 'predestination'. The Holy Quran states, "It is not God who hath wronged them, but they wronged themselves."[161] Using this, Tiresias interprets Oedipus guilt:

> OEDIPUS: What is my guilt, Tiresias? Why do you say I wronged myself? It was a conspiracy that arounded me before I was born, and began to close its circles on me step by step until I found myself involved. Am I guilt?

[160] Bakathir, *The Tragedy of Oedipus*
[161] Holy Quran, (iii: 117).

> TIRESIAS: Would you deny, Oedipus, that your God has given you a mind and a free will.
>
> OEDIPUS: What have my mind and will to do with that has happened to me? How could I avoid what I was completely ignorant of? It was planned that I enter thebes and become its king after marrying its widow queen!
>
> TIRESIAS: You should have explained your case to the people; that Lokasis insinuates this and that you do not know what to do. You would be able to say: O people of Thebes, what do you think? You should say, as for the throne I will accept it, but I shall not marry the queen until I see it testified that I am not the son of Laius, mentioned in the prophecy. O my people gather around and try to find for me a witness and evidence.
>
> OEDIPUS: Do not blame me for a well plotted crime that was committed out of the control of my hands, where I could not help but fall, unknowingly, in its trap. Are you going to put this hardship on me without punishing those who wove it around me?[162]

Tiresias confirms Oedipus's belief in 'free-will' but also tells him that he is responsible for what he chooses for himself, not God or anyone else. Tiresias leads Oedipus to realize his mistake in associating God with the corrupt temple. Once Oedipus finds out that there is no connection between them, he begins to consider his faith in God.

Bakathir's Oedipus now recognizes his way to the most wise and just God. He realizes that Lokasis by his free will, not by God's will, led the conspiracy and Oedipus, himself by his free will, committed a great evil when he chose to accept the throne and the queen. Consequently, the Islamic hero bravely accepts his responsibility:

> OEDIPUS: Today ….. now …. This time I am a man of free will. It is my choice to say it or not. Which is my fate? If I say it, or if I do not say it, it will still be fate …… I will say the truth now, to acknowledge the fate: Jocasta, you are my mother.[163]

---

[162] As quoted in Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 65

[163] As quoted in Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 66

Bakathir's *Oedipus* begins as Gide's Oedipus, an atheist, but later he recognizes another ideology that fits his mind's convictions. According to Tiresias, he becomes "the only great hope for Thebes." To the people of Thebes, he is "a devoted king and the salvation of the country, and a symbol of justice and wisdom." To Creon, he is "the king who does not hesitate to do what is good for his people, even if that would make him lose his throne and wreck his family… Thebes never has had a king of his great nobility and sincerity."[164]

The play ends with a great victory for the people of Thebes. Despite all his suffering, Oedipus calls his people, and announces that he has confiscated the land and fortunes of the temple. All this land and money will be distributed among the people.

When Oedipus walks Islamic ally on the path of God, he becomes the most beloved of his people. But as a human being, he cannot endure living in his palace after Jocasta committed suicide. He tries to blind himself, but Tiresias advises him not to do so, as his people need his eyes for protection against their enemies. Even after providing what his people needed-love, justice, and freedom-Bakathir's Oedipus lives sadly in the palace with a great grief. He decides to leave the throne to somebody possibly better than he. Bakathir's Oedipus is like Sophocles and Gide's, as he leaves Thebes with Antigone begging him to allow her to go with him:

> OEDIPUS: No …. I want to repent before God, the most merciful, the most compassionate …… Do you not see, dear daughter, that this is good for me and your mother. I believe you understand me.[165]

In a public trial, Tiresias stands beside Oedipus and confronts Lokasis before the people. After a long debate between the two priests, the public realizes the truth of Lokasias conspiracy. Oedipus is asked to lead the country again, and he sadly

[164] Hamid, M.A. op. cit., p. 66
[165] As quoted in Hamid, op. cit., p. 67

remains in his position to restore the temple and continue to improve conditions for his people. On a dark night, Oedipus leaves his palace, wishing the Thebans could have a leader better than me.

In short, the main themes of Bakathir's *The Tragedy of Oedipus* represent Islamic thought and its philosophy of life. Bakathir does not believe in dramatizing the Quran, but representing Islamic thought in all forms of drama as the way to create an Islamic drama. There is no priesthood in Islam. God, in the Holy Quran, warns the believers not to be like those who follow blindly and idolize men among them: "They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords in derogation of God"[166].

This condemns the action and behavior of Creon and the majority of the Theban people, who believe blindly in the temple and its false priest Lokasis. The conflict in Bakathir's Oedipus stands for the Islamic view, which is quite different from ancient Greek mythology in which man is led by blind fate and unfair Gods. It also differs from Christianity, in which man is burdened with sins and has to have Jesus to bear these sins for him. It differs, too, from the secular world in which God becomes a myth and man becomes the master of the earth, after the example of Gide's Oedipus.

Bakathir's Oedipus character is based on the Islamic concept of man, which considers man the voice-regent of God on earth, to whom God asked the angels to prostrate themselves. Man is exposed to good and evil and has been given free will. Since God has provided man with a mind and an ability to distinguish between right and wrong, he is responsible for his choices. In this way, Bakathir's Oedipus can be understood as Oedipus plays his role. He has 'free will' and he is exposed to evil through man-made evil deeds. He discovers his guilt and the fact that he had moved in an evil way. He ends as a repentant man

[166] Holy Quran (IX: 31)

seeking God's forgiveness. As usual, the key point of Bakathir's Oedipus is indicated through verses from the Holy Quran:

> And do not follow in the footsteps of the Evil one, for he is to you an avowed enemy. For he commands you to do what is evil and what should yet say of God, but that ye have no Knowledge.[167]

Thus, as an Islamic ideologist Bakathir endeavoured persistently to present the Islamic point of view; he implicitly reflects its ideal as a philosophy throughout his various works. Consequently, Bakathir's interpretations of events and stories from modern or ancient history constitute an addition to the world's dramatic heritage with a distinctive Islamic content and treatment. He was the only Arab dramatist who consistently dedicated his works to Islamic ideology, as well as conducting his life by its principles.

[167] Holy Quran, (II: 168-69)